The Reflective Principle

Just when you thought it was safe...

JUST AS MOST TEACHERS ARE FEELING AT EASE WITH COMPUTERS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS, MORE UNSETTLING CHANGES ARE ON THEIR WAY, BUT THAT'S NO BAD THING, SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

Teachers today have brought computers out of the isolation of labs and into the main learning area of the classroom, enabling access to the web for their students on demand. Whatever the merits of the so-called Digital Education Revolution, we now have computers, notebooks or PCs owned by the school or students, in classrooms, in most cases now playing a vitally important role in teaching and learning. This revolution has been rather slow in coming – more of an evolution than a revolution; it's 20 years since some schools first made it compulsory for students to have a personal computer.

As the Digital Education Evolution gradually picks up speed, the problem is that the functions of the computer are being taken over by the mobile phone. The mobile phone, of course, comes with additional features and these are introducing new challenges, some may even say threats, to current teaching modes. For example, the mobile phone can bypass the managed school network and can access sites and people that many teachers are unhappy about. As a result, this piece of technology is currently banned from many classrooms.

The mobile phone challenge is also coming quickly, not like the introduction of computers into schools that has taken so long to become widespread. The prediction in a recent newsletter published by Gartner, 'the world's leading information technology research and advisory company,' is that 'by 2013, mobile phones will overtake PCs as the most common web access device worldwide.'

How manageable is the traditional classroom going to be when all students have a mobile phone? Teachers are going to have to deal with more than a hidden book under the desk, or paper notes being passed around the classroom or students lapsing into daydreams. They'll now be dealing with a dynamic communication, entertainment and research device. For teachers, it's going to be harder to tame the mobile phone by making it fit into traditional classroom processes than has mostly been the case with computers.

Just as our lifestyles have been transformed by the mobile phone, curriculum and pedagogy will also need to change to keep pace. Students who live by this new technology are not going to happily leave it outside the classroom. Teachers will have to adapt their instructional approaches, particularly those whose preference has been for didactic approaches.

Mind you, it's not all bad news for teachers. Yes, mobile phones in classrooms will prompt uncomfortable change but this change also offers teachers opportunities for invigorating professional renewal. Teaching has never been a dull profession and it's far from dull now. New mobile technologies are pretty exciting and bring closer to realisation the teaching dream of a true individualised student learning setting. With better tools, students can work independently, supported by teachers who can help them to self-regulate their learning, to achieve mastery in accessing and interrogating knowledge, and to learn to work cooperatively with others in a social-constructivist context.

Another Gartner prediction, that 'by 2012, Facebook will become the hub for social networks integration and web socialisation,' brings further challenges for teachers. Government policymakers apparently see schools as the social hubs for student development. Students don't. At present, Facebook and school sit uncomfortably side by side. Our success in the future will depend on the closer integration of education and social networking sites.

If there are challenges for teachers, there are also challenges for administrative staff. The computer has become indispensable in the management of the school, essential for everything from timetable construction and management to student record-keeping and as a resource base for teaching and learning. Alongside this has been the increasing authority in schools of technically savvy leaders who can manage school technology, yet Gartner predicts that 'by 2012, 20 per cent of businesses will own no information technology assets' – instead, outsourcing information technology functions to external providers.

So will we be seeing schools staffed only by those whose primary responsibility is focused on learning: a principal, teachers, social workers, a curriculum developer, and part-time administrative support? Schools may no longer need to employ staff whose primary functions are business management, human resources, technology support, or learning management system hosting and support. This staff shedding is already happening in some schools, for example the Open High School of Utah, where the approach is to 'focus on learning and outsource everything else.'

Technology is continually evolving and, as a consequence, our teaching world and the work we do in it is constantly changing. We can't hope to control the changing world, but we can keep on reinventing ourselves to be successful in it. **T**

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